

Japanese See Potential In Mississippi Manufacturing

Molly Davis, Associated Press

JACKSON, Miss. (AP) — The Japanese ambassador to the United States said Tuesday that he sees potential in energy and manufacturing for more economic partnership between Mississippi and his country.

"Automobiles is a very promising area, but we are looking at various fields, electronics and nuclear powerplants as well," Ambassador Ichiro Fujisaki said at a Mississippi Museum of Art luncheon.

Fujisaki said that future investment hinges on the state maintaining the incentives that attracted other Japanese companies.

Toyota spokeswoman Barbara McDaniel said critical features include infrastructure, such as roads, and funding to train workers.

"Basically our site-selection team was extremely impressed with the quality of the workforce," she said, citing the willingness of existing manufacturers to welcome Toyota onsite for research.

McDaniel said that Toyota's Blue Springs facility will create roughly 1,800 jobs by the time it rolls out the first car, a Corolla, this fall. That number doesn't include Toyota supplier jobs.

Fujisaki visited the Nissan plant in Canton on his tour through the state. Tracy Woodard, Nissan's director of government affairs, said the company continues to invest, noting that in January the first of the company's new commercial vans were produced in the town just north of the capital.

"I think they do the right things to lure international business to their state," said Woodard. "Whether it's job training, whether it's tax credits, they put together the packages they need to attract the foreign investment."

J. P. Shim, a Mississippi State University business professor, said such investments often translate into benefits for natives. He cited community pride and job creation, participation in the global economy, and indirect impacts, such as boosting the entertainment and restaurant sectors.

"And we have retained good quality students from MSU, Ole Miss, and they stay here and try to make a contribution to the state," he said. He cited a better ability for the state to retain engineering and business students in particular.

Shim said that political and economic factors — such as weak labor unions, low

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wages and a high volume of unemployed workers — also figure into companies' investments in Mississippi.

McDaniel cited the state's recent tort reform as another policy that attracts international companies.

"They like states that have really done something to correct what's really a very anti-business environment," she said.

Gray Swoope, the executive director of the Mississippi Development Authority, said that Japan has become the state's top foreign direct investor. Hitachi opened its Oxford facility in the 80s, and the state now hosts Japanese-owned automotive, chemicals and metals production facilities. But MDA is targeting a variety of countries for investment.

"The weak dollar abroad has given us an opportunity for international companies who have market share in the United States, but may not have production here, to shift production, which brings extra jobs," said Swoope.

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